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ART TALK

AHEAD OF THE CURVE

After spending over 50 years in Venice, California, the artist Fred Eversley faces the prospect of leaving.

BY HOWIE KAHN PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALESSANDRA SANGUINETTI

FRED EVERSLEY has been working out of the same 3,000-square-foot studio on Abbot Kinney Boulevard for the past 50 years. The engineer-turned-artist moved to Venice in 1964. “It was the only place on the beach in Los Angeles where black people could get a lease,” he says. Eversley, 77, inherited his studio’s lease from the widow of his friend, the artist John Altoon, after Altoon’s untimely death in 1969. Two years prior, the architect Frank Gehry had reconfigured the space for Altoon, separating the working area in front from the residence in back. Eversley was just a few doors down at the time, sharing a studio with the artist Charles Mattox. Other artists, including John McCracken, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin and James Turrell, were also nearby. Eversley recalls gathering in Turrell’s studio and talking art theory while sitting on a Navajo rug, smoking and listening to Turrell’s then-wife play the harp. “It used to be magic,” says Eversley. “I was lucky I found Venice. Without this community, I probably never would have become an artist.”

Eversley grew up in Brooklyn. His father was an engineer for Republic Aviation before building a multimillion-dollar construction company, and his mother was a teacher. Eversley himself studied engineering at Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh. When he moved to L.A., he put his degree to use by working at Wyle Laboratories, helping to build acoustical testing facilities for NASA’s space flight program. He dated a UCLA M.F.A. student and soon recognized that his know-how as an engineer could be useful in making art, too. As a result, he joined a local, short-lived group called the Aesthetic Research Center, through which he helped artists around L.A. with engineering problems. “One of them was Judy Gerowitz,” Eversley says. “[She] became Judy Chicago.” Of Eversley’s former compatriots, only Bell still works in Venice, splitting his time between there and Taos, New Mexico. The strip of Abbot Kinney where Eversley operates has become valuable commercial property—his current neighbors sell single-origin espresso and organic bedding. “I’m the last one standing,” he says.

The popularity of Eversley’s signature parabolic lens sculptures has surged lately, with a recent, nearly sold-out show at Los Angeles’s David Kordansky Gallery. Each of the 10 new works there, roughly 20 inches in diameter and 6 inches thick, is priced at $250,000. They range from jewel-toned to pearlescent to celestial. But as the show opened and Eversley’s collectors converged, he was also dealing with the possibility of removal from his studio and considering whether to remain in the city he credits with sparking his artistic career. Working and living in a rent-stabilized space means Eversley has paid well below market value. His landlord, ABCO LLC, has tried to raise his rent substantially since at least 1980, he says; a 2011 court ruling found it attempted to do so unlawfully. When Eversley’s most recent lease concluded last July, he was not offered a renewal. The City of Los Angeles Planning and Land Use Management committee recommended the City Council designate the building as a Historic-Cultural Monument on January 29 in response to a petition from a conservation group led by friends. Eversley, who shares the space with his wife, the sculptor and architect Maria Larsson, was served an eviction notice on January 30; the court granted him until February 11 to vacate. (ABCO LLC declined to comment.)

Eversley left his engineering career to pursue art full time in 1967. His leg had been crushed in a car accident, and while he was recovering away from his lab, he started devoting time to making his own pieces. He began by manipulating polyester resin with the intention of encasing photo transparencies within small sculptures of his design. But he became preoccupied with the metaphysical energy he attributed to the resin itself. His early casts manifested as tubes, bricks and objects resembling flying saucers and NASA space modules small enough to fit in one’s palm.

In 1970, on the recommendation of the artist Robert Rauschenberg, who decried the lack of opportunities for artists in L.A., Eversley paid a visit to the gallery of the powerful New York dealer Betty Parsons. At their meeting in Manhattan, Parsons bought a sculpture from the artist. On the same day, Eversley showed his work to his friend Marcia Tucker, then a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. “I showed her the pieces, she freaked out.... In five minutes the entire senior staff at the Whitney was standing in her office,” he recalls. Just three years into his new pursuit, the fledgling artist was offered a solo show at the Whitney. He was told he’d have three months to prepare. “I flew back here to the studio in Venice and worked nonstop.”

The Whitney exhibition launched a career that landed Eversley in the permanent collections of museums including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and New York’s Museum of Modern Art; he would also complete almost two-dozen public commissions for places like the international airports in Miami and San Francisco and an Internal Revenue Service office.

Though Eversley is often associated with Light and Space—a Southern Californian art movement originating in the 1960s—he says his work is more accurately about energy. While artists like Turrell and Irwin are often concerned with expansive experiences and the ways in which bodies are oriented in space, Eversley started working with parabolas because of his fascination with the way they concentrate energy through a single focal point. He spun his first parabolic lenses shortly after the Whitney show concluded in 1970, coloring liquid resin with dye or pigment and pouring it into a cylindrical mold on a turntable, which he would then set into motion. The faster the turntable spins, the greater the centrifugal and gravitational forces. The more centrifugal force exerted on the resin, the deeper the parabolic curve.

One of Eversley’s favorite placements for a sculpture was not in a museum or gallery, but rather at the end of a psychiatrist’s couch. The doctor, a collector, told him it helped patients with personal reflection. Though such works are merely a couple of feet in diameter, they give the impression that looking through them offers passage to another dimension.

David Kordansky, Eversley’s gallerist since last summer, believes the art world has overlooked the power of his artist’s work. “We’re going to change that,” Kordansky says. The sculptures, he says, are both psychedelic and cosmic, “objects whose atmosphere supersedes their objecthood.” Like Kordansky, the multidisciplinary artist Kerry James Marshall considers Eversley to be of a piece with other seminal L.A. artists exploring the intersection of art, science, technology and futurism, except with one significant difference. “Fred was the only black artist I knew of who was doing the same things they were doing,” Marshall wrote, via email. “It is important to acknowledge the truth that there have always been black people in science and technology.”

Eversley steers the conversation back toward energy when asked to discuss the relationship between race and his own work. “Take me for what I do,” he says. “Physical properties are not attuned to race. Gravity is the same for everyone. The work is more about looking at what’s universal rather than what’s different. The differences are really very small.”

One afternoon this past January, facing a possible February eviction, Eversley started casting new work. He monitored the spinning, solidifying resin over the course of 10 hours, concluding after midnight. Parts of another new piece stood in an adjacent workspace: 17 lenses in an array of colors, all in various phases of Eversley’s rigorous 14-step polishing process. He didn’t know if he’d be permitted to stay in the studio long enough to finish the piece. He has considered leaving L.A. altogether and moving back to New York, where he owns a building in SoHo. He says he could also start over again elsewhere in L.A. “But no place I’ve lived has felt like Venice,” he says. “I’ve been influenced by the waves, the wind, the sun and how it all made people happy.” Eversley draws a deep breath. “That’s why the studio is here.” ●

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HUE DID IT
Eversley at his studio in Venice, California, surrounded by the parabolic resin sculptures he has been making since the early 1970s. The two on the left featured in his recent show at David Kordansky Gallery.

FROM LEFT: FRED EVERSLEY, *UNTITLED (PARABOLIC LENS)*, (1969) 2018, 2-COLOR, 2-LAYER CAST POLYESTER, 19 1/4 X 19 1/4 X 6 INCHES (48.9 X 48.9 X 15.2 CM); FRED EVERSLEY, *UNTITLED (PARABOLIC LENS)*, (1974) 2018, CAST POLYESTER, 19 1/2 X 19 1/2 X 9 INCHES (49.5 X 49.5 X 15.1 CM); FRED EVERSLEY, *UNTITLED (PARABOLIC LENS)*, (1972) 2018, CAST POLYESTER, 19 1/2 X 19 1/2 X 5 7/8 INCHES (49.5 X 49.5 X 14.9 CM)